

Exploring Irish Folksong

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499-)

by

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Abstract

Much of the folk music tradition of ancient Ireland was lost to time. It was not until the 18th century that a wave of Irish nationalism spurred the composers of Ireland to notate the old tunes of their motherland. Thomas Moore was a leading Irish composer of this movement. His arrangements of Irish folk tunes became famous and widely known during his lifetime. Due to Moore's work, songs such as "The Last Rose of Summer" are still familiar to most Westerners and are still being arranged by contemporary composers. In this paper I explore the mysterious and stormy background of these ancient songs, infused with Gaelic, medieval Christian, and 18th century harmonic elements.

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Intro to Irish Folksong

Ireland has a rich musical heritage containing thousands of airs – laments, songs of farewell, of war, of death, of love, of rejoicing, cradle songs, work songs, drinking songs, satirical and humorous ballads, and dance tunes (Tessier 15). Thérèse Tessier explains in his book *The Bard of Erin* the process by which these songs became engrained in the culture of the Irish people, saying:

"The airs fixed in people's memories had attained a kind of definitive form through being sung time and time again. Indeed, ordinary people always simplify the musical phrase which they take for their own, shaping colouring and accentuating it: a strange maturing process takes place, a veritable metamorphosis. The original tune thereby gains an indefinable and inimitable charm. It is then no longer the expression of one individual, but that of a whole community, nay, that of an entire race" (Tessier 16).

In the eighteenth century, a wave of Irish composers committed themselves to notating the folk tunes of their motherland, some of them quite ancient. This was, at least in part, inspired by a swell of Irish nationalism. These composers attempted to notate old Irish Gael music from aging bards and harpers before it disappeared forever (Tessier 3). In his preface to *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music*, Edward Bunting, an Irish composer of this era wrote a wonderful description of the importance of recording great Irish music, or any other ancient musical tradition, before it is lost to time:

"Shall we suffer them to perish in our hands at the close of perhaps the last century in which a single new ray of light can be struck out amidst the gloom, with which time envelops the earliest and of the most interesting of its works? In

paying them due attention, we are tracing the progress of the human mind, and endeavoring to restore a page in the history of man” (Tessier 3).

The Music of Erin, or old Gaelic Ireland, emerged from a mysterious background and attained its distinct sound by combining multiple traditions over the centuries. Pre-Christian era Irish music used mostly an irregular 5-note scale, creating a sound that is similar to the pentatonic scales used in Eastern music. Bardic schools were held in high esteem in Ancient Erin. It was believed that poets, bards, and musicians held spiritual, divine powers; they were members of a privileged caste in their society. After the Christianization of Erin, the liturgical modes that had developed throughout medieval Europe were introduced into the Irish Church. Eventually, they were also absorbed into secular music, melding into a hybrid of the two traditions (Tessier 11). Tessier describes the flavor of Irish music in comparison with European music:

“...this music form is capable of displaying the slightest of nuances but its dominant tone remained somber. Devoid of all superfluity, it is simple, sober, condensed, more austere than certain traditions from Mediterranean or Eastern Europe but every bit as varied. It seems to emanate from the Irish soil lying exposed to troubled or sad skies and from the desolate moors. The feelings it expresses range from hopeless nostalgia, permeated with metaphysical anguish, to unbridled joy” (Tessier 14).

English domination of the island also did much to influence the path of Irish music. In the 14th century, the Statutes of Kilkenny forbade Irish courts from keeping bards and outlawed the speaking of Gaelic, pushing both of these ancient traditions underground. (Tessier 12). The Irish people regarded their secret tunes as the “soul of the people during this twilight of the

nobility” as Tessier describes in his book. The Statutes of Kilkenny, while forcing Gaelic traditions into hiding, also saved Irish music from being touched by the developments of the Renaissance or polyphony (Tessier 12). The tunes remained highly melodic and horizontal in nature. They were able to survive into the eighteenth century, when Irish nationalist musicians began to commit them to paper. Until this time, all of the songs were transmitted orally.

In order to demonstrate the stunning effect and melodic beauty that these folksongs had, independent of modern harmonization, I chose to perform the classic tune “Danny Boy” without any accompaniment. This tune has become so popular in the last century that it is probable that every member of my audience had heard it arranged many different ways in several different styles. I chose to strip the tune down to its most basic form. The simple, un-harmonized style in which I performed “Danny Boy” is reminiscent of the means by which these tunes were communicated from one person to another orally.

As Phillips Barry explains in his article “Irish Folk-song,” the bards and Irish people who passed on the music of their culture could not read or notate music and knew nothing of scales, modes, or keys. Yet, if one listens to their music, you cannot help but be transfixed. An Irish air is “something strangely beautiful and fascinating,” Barry conveys, citing “The Last Rose of Summer” as a piece imbued with this evident, inexplicable charm. Despite pieces like “The Last Rose of Summer”’s popularity and use within a variety of genres – such as its incorporation into Friedrich von Flotow’s opera *Martha* – it is important to recognize that folksong is a genre distinct from opera or art song (Barry 332). As Barry states:

“Folk-song is folk-song, because it *has become* the property of the folk in the widest sense of the word... Art-song is static; folk-song is dynamic. The former ends where it begins; the latter begins where it ends” (Barry 333).

The folk music of the Irish helped to unite them and establish their cultural identity, in a way comparable to the cultural importance of gospels to African-Americans. As I will discuss later, these songs bore the soul of the Irish people and expressed love of country, cultural identity, and unity against those who would oppress them.

Gaelic Texts

The eighteenth century Irish composers who notated old Gaelic tunes often set their own English verses to the tunes. The majority of the Irish people could no longer read and speak Gaelic by the eighteenth century. Only some scholars and researchers of the era were able to translate old Gaelic texts into English (Tessier 30). Luckily, this ancient language did not die and has been revived in the last few centuries. Today, most Irish citizens are bilingual in both English and Gaelic.

To truly get the aural effect of an old Irish folksong, it helps to hear it in its original Gaelic. For this reason, I included on my recital program two old Gaelic folk songs, still in their ancient language. As was customary in bardic Irish tradition, I sang these songs accompanied by harp. The harp was always the bard's instrument – it functioned both as accompanist and soloist. The use of harp in old Gaelic music can be traced from ancient religious chanting up into the eighteenth century (Tessier 15). It should be noted that the ancient Irish harp would have been different from our modern harps. Hopefully, I was still able to capture the soothing, mellow nature of these pieces, as they, in the words of Thomas Moore “[fluctuate] between gloom and levity” (Tessier 10).

Thomas Moore and His Melodies

Thomas Moore was a poor Irish commoner who rose to prominence in the eighteenth century through popular poetry and compositions that became common fare in drawing rooms throughout the entire United Kingdom (Tessier 1). Early in his career he met William Power, a music publisher. Power planned to publish collections of old Irish airs for solo voice and piano with new, English texts illustrating the customs and history of Ireland. The first collection of Moore's *Irish Melodies* was published in 1808; the last collection appeared in 1834 (O'Neill 246). These publications of Irish folksongs were in keeping with a new trend for Irish patriotism. Capt. Francis O'Neill describes in his book, *Irish Folk Music*, that these nationalistic songs were both a result of patriotic revival and a means of spurring it on. O'Neil describes the newly notated, old songs with patriotic words, expressing the common tone of nationalism that dominated Ireland in this era, saying: "Their melody and passion awoke the soul of Ireland from the torpor of slavery" (O'Neill 246).

The music of Erin was introduced to Moore by other nationalistic musicians during his time at Trinity College in Dublin. He began by studying Edward Bunting's music on the piano (Tessier 4). Moore said the following on the neglect of Irish music and the need to record it:

"I feel very anxious that a work of this kind should be undertaken. We have too long neglected the only talent for which our English neighbours ever deigned to allow us any credit. Our National Music has never been properly collected; and while the composers of the Continent have enriched their operas and sonatas with Melodies borrowed from Ireland, - very often without even the honesty of acknowledgment - we have left these treasures, in a great degree, unclaimed and fugitive. Thus our Airs, like many of our countrymen, have, for want of protection

at home, passed into the service of foreigners. But we are come, I hope, to a better period of Politics and Music” (Tessier 5).

Thomas Moore was instrumental in bringing into reality a new view both of “politics and music,” as is evident in some of the songs he chose to preserve and arrange.

Patriotism and Politics: “Avenging and Bright”

The tie between politics and music was strong in Moore’s *Irish Melodies* as well as for many other composers of the era. As Madelyn Gail Martin states in her thesis, *Thomas Moore and the Irish Question*, “One of the most outstanding defenders of the suffering Irish nation in the early nineteenth century was the poet Thomas Moore” (Martin 1). Thirty of Moore’s pieces focus on patriotic themes (Tessier 30). Moore’s “Avenging and Bright” is specifically an *aisling* or vision-poem, a Gaelic poetic genre that evokes the Motherland in the shape of a lovely young woman (Tessier 33). In this case the poem specifically refers to the legend of Deirdre. This legend is one from the Ulster cycle, one of the four great cycles of ancient Erin. It is easy to follow the story in the lyrics of “Avenging and Bright.”

The legend goes that Deirdre, a beautiful young woman, is destined to marry King Conner, but she falls in love with a young warrior. They run away to Scotland together with the warrior’s two loyal brothers. The warrior and his brothers are known as the three sons of Usna and the warriors of their native people, the Ulad. They are referred to with these two titles in verses one and two. King Conner sends his men after the runaways and the three brothers are killed in the ensuing battle. Deirdre is brought back to marry King Conner. In differing versions of the tale she dies either of sorrow or by jumping from a moving chariot. In this story, Deirdre came to embody Ireland; and her lover and his brothers are the brave Irish men who fight to love

and protect her from tyranny. This tale later became emblematic as an *aisling*, especially to writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Some saw in these poems and melodies implicit references to Ireland's political situation and desire for freedom, most likely from the tyranny they saw in British rule over their homeland. The theme of abduction was common in many other nineteenth-century Irish folk-songs and was most likely a metaphor for the plight of the Irish people (Freeman 102). Deirdre's story spoke of a desire for liberation from any 'tyrant' who would steal her and force her into an unwanted union. England's long history of colonization over Ireland may have later been interpreted as a second layer of significance in this legend. It was not until the eighteenth century that Deirdre's tale could be seen in such a metaphorical nationalistic way; up until this century, the Irish were split into clans, not yet recognizing themselves as a national whole (Galvin 4).

Moore chose many similar tales and themes for other pieces in his *Irish Melodies*.

Tessier praises these patriotic pieces in his book as some of Moore's best work:

"An epic breath blows through them. Stimulated by the ardour of his attachment to his wounded land...Here he transcends the mawkishness of his drawing-room pieces and allows the fiery eloquence of the ancestors to rise from the depths of his soul to tune it to his theme" (Tessier 34).

The cultural strength of these vigorous, patriotic pieces was confirmed by English hostility toward them. The English feared such songs as representations of the vitality of Irish opposition to Elizabethan occupation of their homeland. As Helen O'Shea explains in her book *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*: "the power of the colonisers exists in part through the capacity to represent the colonised in their own terms" (O'Shea 7). The

English had attempted to exert their control by outlawing native cultural elements, such as Irish language, religion, and music. The constriction which they placed on the Irish people not only failed to weaken opposition, but actually strengthened Irish unity and cultural identity by forcing it underground “into a vast secret society” (Martin 2).

Harmony and Tonalities

“Avenging and Bright” is notable among the 124 melodies that Moore notated, for it maintains much of its old horizontal, melodic nature. Its structure is built upon a mixture of both the Gaelic pentatonic scale and Gregorian modes (Tessier 21). This is uncommon, as many of the melodies taken down by Moore and other Irish composers of the eighteenth century were altered to fit new polyphonic and harmonic paradigms. Just as the Irish people had lost the use of the ancient Gaelic language, Irish composers had lost touch with the original melodic and horizontal nature of the old airs of Erin. These eighteenth-century composers had been trained in polyphony and modern European harmonic structures. They struggled to understand and arrange the melodies of their homeland because they did not fit with those musical structures that had since replaced them (Tessier 12).

Moore was disconcerted by the modes and scales of the Irish tunes that were, by his time, obsolete. His more homophonic, vertical sensibilities led him to alter many of the melodies so that he could harmonize them in ways that seemed to him more comfortable and fitting. Thus, by ‘correcting’ these tunes he and other composers created what can only be described as more watered-down versions of the original tunes (Tessier 12). Moore specifically revealed distaste for the oldest Irish tunes, feeling them to be too wild and unsophisticated. As such, most of the tunes he chose to notate do not date back any farther than the sixteenth century (Tessier 10).

Tessier makes it very clear that he disagrees entirely with Moore's assessment of the tunes:

"It is not the pieces produced in the XVIIIth century which allow Irish traditional music to take its place amongst the finest in existence. The decline has already begun, the melodies become trite under the influence of the harmonic system and sentimentality starts to show through the ancient phrases, the legacy of a glorious past" (Tessier 23).

The harmonic structure of "Avenging and Bright" reveals it to be one of the few truly old melodies that Moore put to paper. The other two melodies in my set, "The Last Rose of Summer" and "At the Mid Hour of Night," were most likely more contemporary tunes of the eighteenth century, though still very Irish in nature (Tessier 18). We know that Moore altered "The Last Rose of Summer," originally known as the "The Groves of Blarney," in order to free the air from rhythmic constraints. He also replaced the original middle section with a much more florid part. Despite its modern alterations, "The Last Rose of Summer" remains, as Tessier stated: "more purely Irish with its emergent pentatonic features than the version on which it was based" (Tessier 24).

Though Moore and most other composers altered the great majority of tunes that they set, there were those who were true to the original structure of the Old Irish airs. Turlough O'Carolan's *A Book of Irish Tunes* is the most faithfully noted document. Tessier describes the sound of these old airs, untouched by modern alterations:

"In its purest state, it appears megalithic, as it were, and seems to plunge its roots in pre-history. The ancient airs are akin to the mysterious standing stones which are recalled in the imposing, massive Celtic crosses" (Tessier 14).

O'Carolan was himself an aging bard of the old Irish tradition when he wrote down the tunes.

Conclusion

The themes explored by Moore included not only patriotic topics, but also themes of love and life. The other two pieces in my set fall into these categories. “The Last Rose of Summer” is a reflection on life and mortality. The piece manages, as only an Irish tune can, a balance of both somber melancholy and lightness. “At the Mid Hour of Night” also expresses this sense of sweet melancholy. This ethereal tune evokes the eternity of Love and sad remembrance of a loved one now gone. Despite its sad nature, it maintains a sense of fond nostalgia. Moore ensured that these haunting tunes would live on. Two centuries later, they are still explored in new and inventive ways by contemporary composers and musicians.

Thanks to the work of composers such as Moore, a portion of the old Irish folksong tradition still exists. Without the surge of patriotism and opposition to English rule that swept Ireland in the eighteenth century, beautiful and iconic pieces like “Danny Boy” and “The Last Rose of Summer” would have been lost to time. Instead, they live on as composers continue to arrange and rearrange them, mesmerizing audiences with their distinctly Irish blend of melancholy, lightheartedness, and otherworldliness.

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Honors Recital: An Exploration of Irish Folksong

Morgan Ulyat, soprano

Three Irish Folksong Settings

- I. The Salley Gardens
- II. The Foggy Dew
- III. She Moved Through the Fair

arr. John Corigliano
(b. 1938)

Hilary Janysek, flute

Danny Boy

Old Irish Air

....Pause....

Oró Mo Leabh beag Féin
Jimmy Mo Mhíle Stór

arr. Nancy Calthorpe

Valerie Vint, harp

Moore's Irish Melodies

- I. The last rose of summer
- II. Avenging and bright
- III. At the mid hour of night

arr. Benjamin Britten
(1913 – 1976)

Hyun-Young Hwang, piano

Honors Recital: Exploring Irish Folksong

Morgan Ulyat

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

Three Irish Folksong Settings

arr. John Corigliano

I. The Salley Gardens

Down by the Salley Gardens my love and I did meet.
She passed the Salley Gardens with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy as the leaves grow on the tree,
But I, being young and foolish, with her did not agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand.
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.
She bid me take life easy as the grass grows on the weirs,
But I was young and foolish and now am full of tears.

II. The Foggy Dew

A-down the hill I went at morn. A lovely maid I spied.
Her hair was bright as the dew that wets sweet Anners verdant side.
"Now where go ye, sweet maid?" said I. She raised her eyes of blue,
And smiled and said, "The boy I'll wed I'm to meet in the foggy dew!"

Go hide your bloom, ye roses red and droop ye lilies rare,
For you must pale for very shame before a maid so fair!
Says I, "Dear maid, will ye be my bride?" Beneath her eyes of blue,
She smiled and said, "The boy I'll wed I'm to meet in the foggy dew!"

A-down the hill I went at morn. A-singing I did go.
A-down the hill I went at morn. She answered soft and low,
"Yes, I will be your own dear bride and I know that you'll be true."
Then sighed in my arms and all her charms, they were hidden in the foggy dew."

III. She Moved Through the Fair

My young love said to me, "My mother won't mind
and my father won't slight you for your lack of kine."
And she stepped away from me and this she did say,
"It will not be long, love, 'til our wedding day."

She stepp'd away from me and she went thro' the fair
And fondly I watched her move here and move there,
And then she went homeward with one star awake,
As the swan in the evening moves over the lake.

Last night she came to me, she came softly in.
So softly she came that her feet made no din,
And she laid her hand on me and this she did say,
"It will not be long, love, 'til our wedding day."

Danny Boy

Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
From glen to glen, and down the mountain side.
The summer's gone, and all the roses falling:
It's you, it's you must go, and I must bide.

But come ye back when summer's in the meadow,
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow.
It's I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow.
Oh, Danny Boy, Oh Danny Boy, I love you so!

But when ye come, and all the flowers are dying,
If I am dead, as dead I well may be,
Ye'll come and find the place where I am lying,
And kneel and say an Ave there for me.

And I shall hear though soft you tread above me,
And all my grave will warmer, sweeter be,
For you will bend and tell me that you love me,
And I shall sleep in peace until you come to me!

Jimmy Mo Mhíle Stór

Arr. Nancy Calthorpe

Bliain an taca seo d'imigh
mo ghrá uaim féin
Ní thiocfaidh sé abhaile
go dtuga sé cúrsa an tsaoil
Nuar a fheicead mo ghile
rithfead le fuinneamh na chóir
Agus clúdódh le mil é,
is é Jimmy mo mhíle stór

These twelve months and better
my darling has left the shore,
He ne'er will come back
till he travels the globe all o'er;
And when he returns,
with laurels I'll crown him all o'er;
He's the fondest of lovers,
sweet Jimmy mo-vee-la-sthore.

Bíonn mo mháthair is m'athair
go síorai ag bruíon liom féin
Dá rá gur leim'boige do mealladh
méi dtús mo shaoil
Mise dá fhulaingt go dubhach
is ag síleadh na ndeor
Le cumann dom chumann,
is é Jimmy mo mhíle stór

My father and mother
they never do give me ease,
Since my darling has left me
to cross the raging seas;
I once had a sweetheart
– had plenty of gold in store,
But he's gone o'er the ocean,
sweet Jimmy mo-vec-la-sthore.

Oró Mo Leabh beag Féin

Arr. Nancy Calthorpe

Cé hé an leabh
a raghaidh ar an aonach liom?
Oró! mo leabh beag féin
Aililiú o! mo leabh beag sonasmhar
Aililiú o! mo leabh beag seimh
Aililiú o! is raghaidh sé a shodladh
gus eireoidh ar maidin le fainne'n lae

Who is the baby
who will go to the fair with me?
Oh! My own little baby.
Aililiú o! My happy little child,
Aililiú o! My gentle little child,
Aililiú o! And he'll go to sleep and
He'll get up in the morning at daybreak.

Cé hé an leabh
a raghaidh go Cill Airne liom?
Oró! mo leabh beag féin
Aililiú o! mo leabh beag sonasmhar
Aililiú o! mo leabh beag seimh
Aililiú o! is raghaidh sé a shodladh
gus eireoidh ar maidin le fainne'n lae

Who is the child
who will go to Killarney with me?
Oh! My own little baby.
Aililiú o! My happy little child,
Aililiú o! My gentle little child,
Aililiú o! And he'll go to sleep and
He'll get up in the morning at daybreak.

Moore's Irish Melodies

Arr. Benjamin Britten

I. The Last Rose of Summer

Tis' the last rose of summer left blooming alone.
All her lovely companions are faded and gone.
No flower of her kindred, no rosebud is nigh
To reflect back her blushes, or give sigh for sigh.

I'll not leave thee thou lone one to pine on the stem.
Since the lovely are sleeping, go, sleep thou with them;
Thus kindly I scatter thy leaves o'er the bed
Where thy mates of the garden lie senseless and dead.

So soon may I follow when friendships decay,
And from love's shining circle the gems drop away!
When true hearts lie wither'd and fond ones are flown,
Oh! Who would inhabit this bleak world alone?

II. Avenging and Bright

Avenging and bright fall the swift sword of Erin
On him who the brave sons of Usna betrayed!
For every fond eye which he wakened a tear in,
A drop from his heart-wounds shall weep o'er her blade.

By the red cloud which hung over Conner's dark dwelling,
When Ulad's three champions lay sleeping in gore,
By the billows of war which so often high swelling,
Have wafted these heroes to victory's shore!

We swear to avenge them! No joy shall be tasted,
The harp shall be silent, the maiden unwed,
Our halls shall be mute, and our feels shall lie wasted,
Till vengeance be wreaked on the murderer's head!

Yes, monarch! Though sweet are our home recollections,
Though sweet are the tears that from tenderness fall;
Though sweet are our friendships, our hopes and affections,
Revenge on a tyrant is sweetest of all!

III. At the Mid Hour of Night

At the mid hour of night when stars are weeping, I fly
To the lone vale we lov'd when life shone warm in thine eye;
And I think that if spirits can steal from the region of air,
To revisit past scenes of delight; thou wilt come to me there,
And tell me our love is remembered e'en in the sky.

Then I'll sing the wild song, which once 'twas rapture to hear,
When our voices, both mingling, breathed like one on the ear,
And, as, Echo far off thro' the vale my sad orison rolls,

My voice from the kingdom of souls
The notes which once were so dear!

↑
?
too many
commas -
Is this in the
original?